

‘Eyes are watching’ stimulus spending

Inspector General on mission to prevent funds waste

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PALM SPRINGS – The inspector general tracking how California spends nearly \$85 billion in stimulus funding had a message for local leaders on Thursday: State and federal officials are closely watching how this money is spent, so make sure it is appropriated correctly.

“I’m on the road, putting people on notice,” state Inspector General Laura Chick said during a visit to Palm Springs on Thursday. “There’s a whole lot of eyes watching.”

Estimates show that when the government has large sums of money – notably after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorism attacks or Hurricane Katrina – 10 percent to 17 percent is deemed fraudulent or wasteful, Chick said. “That’s not an acceptable figure for me,” she said.

Chick, appointed to the post in April, was in the desert as part of what she described as a statewide “prevention tour.” Her goal is to advise local communities of the potential pitfalls that could result from spending large amounts of money. About 20 local officials attended the reception.

Valley Wish Lists

Of the \$85 billion the state is expected to receive, more than \$50 billion will be spent on transportation, health care, energy, and other projects. The money is still being appropriated, so it is not known how much will be seen locally.

That hasn’t stopped Coachella Valley officials from developing large wish lists, especially as the economy forced them to make cuts in their own budgets. Already, the desert’s three school districts have secured nearly \$20 million to restore cuts and save jobs and Palm Springs announced it got \$1.8 million for a new entryway park at Gene Autry Trail and Vista Chino.

“It’s intended to rev up our economy,” Chick said. “Heaven knows there’s not a community in California that doesn’t need it.” Desert officials, during a brief question-and-answer session, argued the state’s own fiscal crisis has meant less money locally. It’s a message Chick told The Desert Sun she’s heard in communities statewide. “What I’m hearing is a need to backfill; that’s not what these funds are for,” she said. “These are intended, first and foremost, to create jobs.”

Be Efficient

Though the funding is just beginning to trickle in, Chick said the U.S. Government Accountability Office is already in California ensuring the money is being spent correctly. She’s requested “very clear rules” from federal counterparts and said additional work will be done to the state stimulus funding website – all in an effort to improve transparency. She hopes that it also will boost the public’s confidence in government at all levels.

“At the end of the day folks, the economic stimulus dollars need to be spent quickly,” said Assemblyman Manuel Perez, a Coachella Democrat who leads the Assembly’s Stimulus, Economic Recovery, and Jobs Task Forces. “But we need to be effective and we need to be efficient.”